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PRINT TRANSCRIPT

The Current Transcript for April 6, 2017

Host: Piya Chattopadhyay

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Listen to the full episode

Prologue

[Music: Theme]

SOUNDCLIP

We have been very clear to the Assad regime but also to other players that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.

PIYA CHATTOPADHYAY: Former US President Barack Obama's red line to Syria amounted to little more than a blur in the six-year conflict. The use of chemical weapons was supposed to be a deal breaker that would launch a definitive action by the US to end the violence. But that hasn't happened and not again after this week's chemical attack and many say it likely won't happen if there is another similar attack in Syria. And it all adds to the ongoing question: why ending the war in Syria has been so elusive. We'll talk about that in just a few moments. And then we're taking a trip up north to Cross Lake, Manitoba.

SOUNDCLIP

I always think about killing myself. Like I want to die so bad. Nobody knows how much I want to take my own life.

PC: That young mother is not alone in her struggle to stay alive. In just a year, five young people took their lives in a small northern Manitoba community and it declared a state of emergency. The *CBC*'s **The Fifth Estate** spent nine months getting to know the people of Cross Lake and to hear about their struggles and successes. We'll hear some of the voices of Cross Lake in half an hour. And after that—

SOUNDCLIP

Does the exhaust through a tailpipe send you on a tailspin? Do all those reports of global warming leave you in a cold sweat? If so, you may be suffering from a condition called “eco anxiety”.

PC: If headlines about the dwindling health of Mother Earth are making you sick, you're not alone. A new report by the American Psychological Association shows that worrying about climate change is having a serious impact on our mental health. In an hour we'll hear from an eco-therapist who's seen a steady stream of people who need

help coping with their environmental woes. Hi. I'm Piya Chattopadhyay sitting in for Anna Maria Tremonti and this is **The Current**.

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'Syrians are dying every single day': Why can't the conflict end?

Guests: Hsain Al-shihabi, Nader Hashemi, Alia Malek

SOUNDCLIP

So if the patient arrives to the hospital alive, maybe we can treat him. But most of the patients, they die before arriving to hospitals. They suffocate because of the huge amount of secretions in the lungs and because of the muscles because of this nerve agent which was used. So they suffocate. If they reach the hospital, mostly they can be treated. We can intubate them and help them. But mostly they die before on their way during transportation and evacuation.

PC: That was Dr. Abdulhai Tennari speaking about treating victims of the chemical attack in Syria's Idlib province on Tuesday. A suspected Syrian government chemical attack on an opposition controlled area has killed more than 70 people this week including at least 20 children. This is not the first time chemical weapons have been used in the six-year Syrian conflict. A team of UN weapons inspectors confirmed the use of the nerve agent sarin in an attack in 2013. At that time, then-UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon told the UN Security Council he believed that attack constituted a war crime. As atrocities such as this one continue in Syria, the world is asking what needs to be done to prevent them and why it's been so difficult to find a way out of the current situation. And for those watching from afar, watching is difficult. Hsain Al-shihabi is a Syrian Canadian and Syrian youth mentor at the Canadian Mental Health Association. And he is with me in Toronto. Hello.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Hello.

PC: These last couple of days, what's been going through your mind?

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: It's a very complex time for me emotionally. First, maybe it's worth acknowledging that what I say is not representative of the Syrian community at large. It's my personal experience. But I don't actually try to find the news. I don't seek it out in the morning. So I still haven't seen any of the images.

PC: You're avoiding it intentionally.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yes. Yes. It's been like this for the past few years or so. I've learned the cycle of looking at the news and my response to it and how it affects my daily life and my ability to function.

PC: It's too hard for you to see pictures from your homeland of Syria and the images of the war.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yeah. I just avoid it altogether.

PC: So you're avoiding watching the news from Syria and have been for the last number of years. At the same time, you help counsel young people who are taking in these images by choice. They want to watch and see the information coming from their homeland. What are they telling you after this latest chemical attack?

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yesterday actually, I had just left an appointment with a youth and it ended up being an hour-long venting on his part.

PC: Venting about the chemical attack?

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yeah, yeah. It hit him particularly hard.

PC: This is a young man who has emigrated from Syria.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yes. So what he was saying is he's fed up. He's really fed up and he's also very helpless and I identify with that. There's a lot of common feelings between you know the people who are in diaspora for a long time and people who have been here for only a year. That feeling of helplessness and just feeling tired. There's a lot of helplessness also.

PC: And when he says the words fed up or you say you feel similarly fed up, what are you fed up with when it comes to the Syrian war?

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: I think for me, I've been really exhausted watching what's happening and watching the response. A lot of us feel like Syria has become a square on a chess board in the global politics and we're just being played and all at the expense of the Syrian people. It just feels like it's dehumanizing. It's not being taken seriously. And so that's where that helplessness I feel comes from and that tiredness.

PC: Words, words, words, inaction. More words, words, words, like a cycle the last six years you would say.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yeah

PC: What do you do—aside from avoiding the news—which is one way to cope I suppose, avoiding the images. It's been six years and by a lot of estimations, no end in sight. How do you get through it?

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: For me, I have my own routine a little bit. I had to develop it. First of all, I avoid the images. I vent also. That's what a lot of people do. This youth I was meeting with yesterday, in the end he's like oh, I'm so sorry. I'm like nope, this is what this is for. He's like but I feel so much better now. I'm like okay. He didn't say I feel so much better, but I feel a little bit better. A friend of mine, I was talking to a friend of mine and he was at a yoga class. The instructor was saying take a moment to acknowledge the pain in your body. And for him, it was just a moment where he just started crying or weeping in that moment. And we just—everybody has. I'm also weepy. So that's the thing that I do that helps me sometimes. But it depends on what's bugging you the most. We struggle with some form of survivor's guilt or the fact that we're so helpless and we want to do something. And the answer's definitely not go there but do something here. So in 2012 when it all started, where I lived that was in Kitchener, we started a school for the younger kids who are growing up and their idea of Syria is just what they hear in the news. And so in the beginning, it was about building a counter-narrative about hey, you can learn Arabic and we can talk about culture and things like that. And I guess my job is part of how I cope.

PC: Thank you for coming in and I appreciate your time.

HSAIN AL-SHIHABI: Yeah. You're welcome.

PC: Thanks. Hsain Al-shihabi is a Syrian Canadian and a Syrian youth mentor at the Canadian Mental Health Association and he was with me here in our Toronto studio. Well, the latest wave of shocking images from Syria has renewed a six-year-old question: why has it been so hard to bring an end to the conflict? This week the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting and the European Union has convened yet another conference to find some answers. But critics are doubtful those will change anything. So with no political resolution in sight, we're joined by two people who have spent a lot of time thinking about a way forward in Syria. Nader Hashemi is the director of the Center for Middle East Studies and an associate professor of Middle Eastern Islamic politics at the *University of Denver*. He is also the author of **Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy** and co-editor of **The Syria Dilemma**. He is in Denver, Colorado. Alia Malek is a Syrian-American civil rights lawyer and a journalist. She reported from Syria during the first two years of the conflict. She is the author of **The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria**. She's in Brooklyn, New York. Hello to both of you.

NADER HASHEMI: Hi.

ALIA MALEK: Good morning.

PC: Alia, let me start with you. When you saw the images of the chemical attacks emerging from Syria this week,

what was going through your mind?

ALIA MALEK: Well, it's a difficult way to wake up, that's for sure. That's part of the problem I guess when you know, we exist in two planes. I think a lot of Syrians in the diaspora, we're living our normal lives in this time zone but we're always kind of have part of our minds with what's going on over there. Obviously it was devastating. But I want to rather than sort of like dwell on the voyeurism of that, the question that keeps coming back is that Syrians are dying every single day in Syria and have been for the last six years and you know it's a phenomena that we start to object in these minor—you know every once in a while when the methods are what becomes so utterly distasteful. But I think we've become quite accustomed to the death of Syrian civilians.

PC: And we'll talk about the response to this attack in just a moment but let me bring Nader in. Nader, let's talk about the timing of this attack. What do you think about that? Is it significant?

NADER HASHEMI: Well, I think it is because you know the attack is taking place just a few days after the Trump administration openly announced that they have no problem with Assad staying in power. Their only concern with respect to Syria is ISIS. And I suspect that that sent a green light to the regime in Damascus that they can act with impunity with respect to how they want to prosecute this war. So I think that timing is very significant and I suspect we're going to see more attacks such as the one that happened yesterday until there is someone in the international community that's willing to stand up to Assad and his atrocious behaviour.

PC: And given that you say that was a green light as you see it from the White House a couple of days ago, but then yesterday President Trump, his first statement was really critical of Obama's approach to Syria. But later in the day, he did say that the chemical attack was heinous, that he has changed his views on Bashar al-Assad and that the attack crossed a lot of lines for him. So Nader, if you saw a couple of days ago as a green light, was yesterday a red or a yellow light coming from the White House?

NADER HASHEMI: Well, if we were you know living in normal circumstances with a normal president in the White House, one could sort of perhaps interpret the president's comments along those lines. But we're dealing with a president who as everyone knows doesn't believe in the facts. He believes in alternative facts. There's a lot of simple incoherency within Washington right now in terms of you know who's in charge of foreign policy. There's a Secretary of State by the name of Rex Tillerson, but it's pretty clear that the person running US foreign policy today is the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. So I don't have any serious hopes that the president's statements are actually going to amount to any serious and coherent policy that could bring an end to these atrocities.

PC: But the statements at least in tone yesterday changed, Alia. Trump saying heinous acts by the Assad regime was how he referred to it, directly connecting the chemical attack to the Assad regime, something that this US administration had not done up until this point. So is directly criticizing Bashar al-Assad by the US and other Western leaders and countries, does that change anything in terms of trying to get something done effectively in Syria?

ALIA MALEK: Well, let's see. Let's give President Trump a chance. However, I think given all the intrigue around how much his election was affected by the Russians, this is sort of an easy rhetorical stance to take to sort of try to assert some kind of independence from the Russians because obviously the Russians are one of the main principal backers of the Assad regime. But we've had a lot of rhetoric over the last six years. Again, I mean I would still ask the question: why is it that you know we object to this kind of slaughter but we haven't been objecting to other kinds of slaughter? I mean what is it about, I mean there's a kind of voyeurism to this, this idea that this method of slaughter is particularly offensive, but it doesn't change the fact that it's completely consistent with what has been happening for six years.

PC: And I know you're asking that question rhetorically somewhat, but what is your answer to the question that you just asked? Why do we continue to let the violence on whether it's by chemical attack or other hideous means of killing people in Syria continue?

ALIA MALEK: I think there's been a really effective sort of campaign to assert the idea that the alternative to Assad is much worse than Assad himself, that the devil you know is better than the devil that you might bring about. And the fact that ISIS does carry out its tactics in technicolour, they're quite savage, this has a way of—you

know again, it's about methodology. Right? We sort of prefer the clean shaven suit-wearing violence of a regime like Bashar al-Assad to the kind of what we would say sort of have opaque rules of engagement, that actors like ISIS carry out.

PC: Nader, where are you on this? To pick up on what Alia was saying, is there a sense from you that the West, we're saying the right things but not doing things "deliberately". Is there sort of like we will say the words and will stand back and let them just you know fight to the death so to speak?

NADER HASHEMI: Well, you know there's been a lot of really good reporting in terms of why there hasn't been a more coherent and I think serious policy from the major Western powers and it basically boils down to from at least a US perspective being the most important player in the international system, President Obama early calculated that you know core US national interests not withstanding the war crimes and the crimes against humanity are not threatened in the context of the conflict in Syria. And Obama has repeatedly said that he's deeply traumatized by what's happening but he just doesn't know what to do. And that I think is one of the biggest miscalculations that President Obama has made with respect to Syria because the conflict in Syria as President Obama early suggested and calculated, did not stay in Syria. It deeply destabilized not just the Middle East but it had huge effects in terms of the politics of Europe, the flow of refugees, the rise of right-wing populist parties, the Brexit vote. And I would also argue that the conflict in Syria also had indirect effects on the 2016 presidential election because Trump was able to successfully you know exploit the fear of Syrian refugees, the fear of terrorism to rally public opinion around his narrative. So I think fundamentally the reason why there hasn't been I think a more serious policy with respect to Syria is because the great powers led by the United States calculated that there wasn't really a core set of interests that would merit an intervention. And now we're in a moment when everyone in the West at least is consumed by their own internal politics—chaos in Washington, fear of sort of right-wing populist parties coming to power in Europe—and no one has any I think interest or seriousness about dealing with this humanitarian and moral catastrophe that we've been watching for the last six years.

ALIA MALEK: And we should add, I mean that miscalculation is really at best negligent. It's really inexplicable and critically, you know it wasn't that there wasn't a path forward, a way to leverage influence with the Iranians and the Russians who are the principal backers. Let's not forget the Obama administration was negotiating a major nuclear deal with Iran. It had cards to play. It just didn't seem to think about that Syria warranted that. And I think in retrospect, even at the time—you don't even have to be that many years out—it was a massive miscalculation. It's really inexplicable, quite frankly.

PC: But here we are you know in April of 2017, Alia, and the international committee once again trying to come up. It may not be that many countries but they're still meeting and trying to come up with some political resolution on Syria. So are you hopeful that it might work this time and why haven't they worked? I mean beyond it's not in our own interest to go into this war you know halfway around the world—though arguably it is an interest as Hashemi pointed out—are you hopeful that there can be a political resolution?

ALIA MALEK: I mean it really depends. The problem is that you have—I mean the Assad regime and Assad's militaristic capabilities are bolstered by the fact that you have Iran and Russia backing him up. So who is going to confront Iran and Russia? And it's questionable whether or not the United States, with this current administration and given all the intrigue surrounding it, is the administration at its best position to do that. But it comes down to that in my analysis.

PC: But you know if you and I were having this conversation say three years ago and it was President Obama, you might say very similar things, that it really depends on getting the key players—the Irans, the Russias—on side to end this thing. So in some ways, what I'm hearing from you is that nothing's really changed in the last three years.

ALIA MALEK: Right, except the card, the leverage that the United States had to play in negotiating a deal with Iran is no longer on the table.

PC: And Nader, where are you on this? When you look forward, is there a way to solve this politically or are we all just entrenched in where we've been for the last six years politically?

NADER HASHEMI: Unfortunately I think that is going to be what we can expect in the coming months and

NADER HASHEMI: Unfortunately I think that is going to be what we can expect in the coming months and years. I mean I had some hope that if Hillary Clinton would have been elected, she was on record where she consistently stated that if she becomes president, she wants to establish a no-fly zone. She wants to establish safe zones. She wants to challenge the Iranian and Russian position on Syria. That could have led to a change in battlefield conditions. It could have perhaps created an environment where you could have serious negotiations leading to some sort of just resolution of this conflict. But with President Trump in power who is so closely allied with Russia in so many ways, there is no hope that you know the Russian position and the Iranian position will be challenged. And they're deeply invested in Syria and no one else is, so they will continue to write the rules of this game and the Syrian population and the rest of the Middle East will suffer as a consequence.

PC: As they have today, Russia saying that don't be quick to judge that this is Assad, the Syrian foreign minister saying that any investigation into this will have to be by certain rules that they set out and they don't have trust in the independence of anyone coming in to investigate that. Alia Malek, I just got a couple of minutes left. But if you are Bashar al-Assad, what is the message you're hearing from the international community after this week's attack?

ALIA MALEK: First of all, I think he hears what he wants to hear but listen, he has been able to act with impunity for six years and I don't think he's heard anything that indicates he needs to change his course of behaviour. And one of the things—we don't have time to get into this—but there are the dynamics of how this regime has ruled for the last 40 years and this is something that I go into a little bit in my book. But this is a way, you know there's this presumption that he's ashamed to have gotten caught doing this and I don't think that's a correct assumption. I think he is showing what he can do and what he can get away with to his people specifically and to his opposition. He just gave an interview in a Croatian newspaper where he said there is no way to reach any kind of results and negotiations. The only way forward is victory. And you know he's letting his people know this is the cost of standing up to me and he's doing it as a way to hide a threat in plain sight, quite frankly. So the denials are just a charade, just a performance.

PC: Alia Malek and Nader Hashemi, thank you for both your time today.

ALIA MALEK: Thank you.

NADER HASHEMI: Thanks.

PC: Alia Malek is a Syrian-American civil rights lawyer and she is a journalist. She's also the author of **The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria**. She was in Brooklyn, New York and Nader Hashemi is the director of the Center for Middle East Studies and an associate professor of Middle East and Islamic politics at the *University of Denver*. He was in Denver, Colorado. Well, the *CBC News* is next and then we are heading up north to Cross Lake, Manitoba where tragedy hasn't stopped the youth from dreaming.

SOUNDCLIP

I would like to go play in the NHL, but I'm chasing smaller goals right now before I chase that one. I don't believe in myself that I can accomplish these goals, but I just want to make my dad proud.

PC: Some voices from Cross Lake, Manitoba when we return. I'm Piya Chattopadhyay and this is **The Current**.

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'I want to die so bad': Indigenous youth from Cross Lake, Man., document hope and despair

Guests: Gillian Findlay

PC: Hi, I'm Piya Chattopadhyay sitting in for Anna Maria Tremonti and you're listening to **The Current**.

[Music: Theme]

PC: Still to come, there's mounting evidence that the steady flow of bad news around climate change is putting a strain on our mental health. We'll hear the latest on so-called “eco anxiety”. That's in half an hour. But first, what happens when you give Indigenous youth in a remote northern community cameras and ask them to document their lives?

SOUNDCLIP

I'm Christian Bailey. I'm 17 years old. I want to be a hero someday and I'm from Cross Lake. I was planning on doing a movie of my own life. **The Life of Christian** or something.

PC: Christian Bailey lives in Cross Lake, Manitoba. It is a remote northern Indigenous community where last winter, five young people took their own lives. And in the weeks that followed, 140 more attempted suicide. The *CBC*'s **The Fifth Estate** went to Cross Lake to find out what was happening and over the course of nine months, they spoke with the people who live there and gave cameras to local teens like Christian so they could document their hopes and struggles. **The Fifth Estate**'s Gillian Findlay is with me in our Toronto studio to tell us more about what she and her team heard from the community of Cross Lake. And just a heads up: there is some very emotional yet frank talk about suicide coming your way. Gillian, hello.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Hi, Piya.

PC: Christian wants to be a hero like so many 17 year olds, huh?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: He is such a normal 17-year-old kid in so many ways but he lives in a very difficult place.

PC: And what is Cross Lake like?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well, Cross Lake is a Cree community—8,500 people, two-hour flight, 500-kilometre drive north of Winnipeg—very isolated as you can imagine. And it has all the problems that we associate with those kinds of communities, everything from unemployment, addiction rates, violence, overcrowding. There's a severe shortage of housing in that community. In some cases you have three and even four generations of people living in a house and those kinds of conditions create their own problems as we know.

PC: Sadly stereotypical in some ways.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Very much so.

PC: And so as I said in the introduction, five young people kill themselves. A hundred-forty more attempt suicide. That is staggering for any sized community, let alone one that is 8,500 people. So that's what you knew going in to this community about the suicide epidemic. What more did you know? What were you expecting when you got there?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: We didn't really know what to expect. I mean we were staggered too when we saw those statistics and Cross Lake briefly was in the news for the five suicides because they all happened within a few weeks of each other. And so we knew about it and we made some initial inquiries and started talking to the people in the community and they said you know we're so terribly worried because all these other kids have attempted suicide. We don't have the resources to deal with this. And we thought well, if nothing else, this is going to be a fascinating and really important community to be profiled and that this is something that we could do. So we decided that we would go in. As you describe, we gave some of the kids some cameras so that they could document their own lives. And we kept going back. I think the team—and it was very much a team effort—we were in about five or six times over that period. And you know what we discovered was a lot of darkness as you can imagine and there were some very dark times for some of these people. But we also discovered a lot of joy, a lot of hope. And you know it is one of the pleasant reminders of going to these kinds of communities where you realize that it is a community in the best sense of the word as well.

PC: And the resilience of people.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Absolutely.

PC: So let's talk about Christian because he kind of embodies those things. There he is, 17 years old talking about wanting to be a hero, having that hope that you speak of. Gillian, tell me more about Christian.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Christian is in school. He's been in and out of school. He's 17 years old. He's in grade nine for the fifth time but he comes from a terribly dysfunctional home—both parents unemployed, both parents alcoholics, a brother also in the home who drinks as well, and younger siblings that Christian feels very responsible for. So on the outside, you heard a little bit of his voice as we started here. You know he's as fun loving and as outgoing as any 17-year-old kid you want to meet but you don't have to scratch the surface very hard.

SOUNDCLIP

They drink a lot. And whenever my parents drink, my brother will drink too. It hurts to see my brother want to just grow up to being like them. Everyone is miserable in that house. They would drink and then people would come in the room and do things to me. They would touch me in places I wouldn't even want to be touched. Back then, if you had alcohol, you were allowed to party in there. Six or seven people that did that to me. It kind of messed me up in school.

PC: So Gillian, he's talking about abuse. Sexual abuse in his own home.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: He was sexually abused, he says, as a child several times.

PC: And the drinking thing—isn't Cross Lake a dry community?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: It is and the community itself made a decision to be dry. But as I think we know, a lot of dry communities aren't. If you're determined, there's always places you can get liquor and other drugs. But the particular problem here is that this reserve is right next door to a municipality of Cross Lake which is actually under provincial administration. And there is a vendor with a provincial license to sell alcohol. They've gone to the province. They've gone to that other community and said look. this is harming us. Could we please, please find a way to shut that vendor down or to in some way limit the ability of our people to come and buy alcohol? And it's fallen on deaf ears. It's one of the great frustrations they have.

PC: Let's meet some more people that you met. So there's another young man, Vince Gill. How old is he?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Vince Gill is I think is 17 if I remember correctly. He's a hockey player.

PC: Okay. This is Vince I'm talking about another big problem that plagues Cross Lake—the reason you actually went up there—which is suicide. So let's listen to Vince.

SOUNDCLIP

All these people thought they can just get away from their problems. But then they're just putting their problems on other people. I know a lot of people that tried killing themselves. He came to me with a rope burn on his neck. [Sobbing] I told him that what about us, man? What about the people that care about you, man? Like we're gonna miss you too. We love you and we don't want you to leave us like that.

PC: Wow.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Yeah. I mean every kid in that community knows a kid who has tried or sadly succeeded, if that's the right word, and it just permeates that place. You know everybody talks about them but with great confusion. You know why? What could we have done? And everybody lives in fear that there will be more. In that community they've now identified 149 kids who they have deemed at being risk of suicide and they are now trying to follow them to make sure nothing more happens.

PC: And you know again, the surprising thing of a guy like Vince, he has his big dreams and he talks to you about

PC: And you know again, the surprising thing of a guy like Vince, he has his big dreams and he talks to you about it. So this is Vince talking about his future.

SOUNDCLIP

I'm Vince Gill Scott. I'm 18 years old. I want to be a pro athlete. I live in Cross Lake. I'm starting to get noticed around Canada and pretty soon people around the world are going to know who I am. I want to use hockey to see different places and go to places I've never been before. I would like to go play in the NHL.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Yeah. He's a hockey player and we actually follow him as he goes to a neighbouring community to try out for the junior A team. And this is going to be his ticket out, he thinks, at that point.

PC: And I want you to talk about one more of the people that you met and this is Maxine Monias, another teenager. So tell us about Maxine.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Maxine is—we were just gobsmacked when we met Maxine. She's 15 years old. She has tried to take her life four times in her brief 15 years. First time she was only nine and she, within 10 minutes of meeting her, we asked if we could do an interview and we just sat down on the bed and she was so open and so shockingly frank about why she did it, what she was thinking at the time and most distressingly, the fact that she says she gets up every day and still thinks about it. And there are days where she says I just want to be in my coffin.

SOUNDCLIP

I always think about killing myself. Like I want to die so bad. Nobody knows how much I want to take my own life. Nobody knows how much I want to leave this Earth, how much I want to stop breathing. I hung myself in my room and I locked the door. But my mom broke my door to get me down. I was so close to killing myself. If it wasn't for my mum, I wouldn't have been here right now. I would've been in my coffin.

PC: Gillian, I don't know, maybe this is a totally inappropriate question because we know that suicide is so complicated. Why—how does she explain it?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well, she explains it again, with reference to her family, it's a dysfunctional home I think would be the politest way of saying it. She's had family members who have committed suicide who she grieves for still. During this crisis last winter, one of the five who did die was a friend of hers and so she's still coping with all of that. And these kids are doing it in a context where there's not much support for them. I mean the school is tries to be support. There are teachers. There are some family counselors there but there's no permanent mental health professional there.

PC: Is she on this 149 kids that are on a watch list?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: She is indeed, yeah.

PC: So someone is watching her. You mentioned counselors. How many? What are they doing?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well, first of all, there is no mental health professional there. And after the suicide crisis, the community was told by the federal government that they would provide two permanent therapists to come in which is probably less than that's needed by a long shot. But anyway, it was something. But they weren't given the funding, the necessary funding to support those two. So what they're dealing with now is they have a couple of people who come in on a rotating basis, don't know the community, don't stay long enough to have any real connections with some of these kids that they're supposed to be helping. We were there one day at the school and there was a crisis. A young boy got upset about something. He was one of the kids on the watch list. Ran out, said he was going to go kill himself. Eventually the police were called. Eventually they found him. And he had to be flown to Winnipeg for assessment. You know that's how little help this community has.

PC: And you spoke to a guy named Ron Lepage. Is he one of the counselors?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: He's a family counselor. He doesn't have the professional qualifications to actually do the

kind of therapy that these kids no doubt need.

PC: Part of the community?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Part of the community and doing the best he can.

PC: Alright. Let's take a listen to Ron.

SOUNDCLIP

I thought that somebody is out there thinking of suicide and is contemplating it and that we don't know who it is. That's what keeps me up at night. The kids will say that they don't feel that they're appreciated. I hear a lot of "nobody cares anyway. Nobody loves me anyway." I think they're broken. I think their hearts are broken. It upsets me that we are not cared for or seen as important because if it was in the white community, how it would be there. Yes, it does make me angry. But anger is not going to get me anywhere. I just go on every day trying to help the youth, trying to help people that are thinking of suicide.

PC: Clearly Ron's frustrated.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: And you know the lack of help in this crisis is only the latest frustration with this community. It goes back you know to the sixties and the seventies. That's when Manitoba Hydro went in and built dams that destroyed their traditional hunting and fishing grounds. You know there was never any compensation for that, they say. There is now 80 per cent unemployment in this community. There's the overcrowding that I mentioned. And now you have the crisis of these kids dying and they are just not equipped to deal with it and they know it.

PC: Again, sadly, familiar. Almost every time we see these it's the same thing and then enters the chief always because as the head of the community, you know has to bear a lot of this stuff and come up with solutions. You spoke with the chief.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Yep.

PC: Her name is Cathy Merrick?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Cathy Merrick.

PC: Okay. So let's listen to what Cathy told you.

SOUNDCLIP

I'm angry because I feel like a beggar in my homeland. That's why I am angry and I shouldn't have to beg what my people should have in this country we call Canada. We ask for nothing over and above that any other Canadian would get. We ask nothing over and above than any other Manitoban would get. We just want the same standards that are provided to other people in this good country we call Canada. That's all I want. I don't want to beg no more.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Such a simple request in so many ways.

PC: Yeah. Yeah.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: They declared a state of emergency last winter and that was very deliberate. They wanted to draw attention to this problem and they wanted help.

PC: So where does Cathy kind of take this all back to? Like where does it start?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well, the big root of it all, if you talk to enough people they say look, we know we have a crisis in parenting. These kids are the product of a crisis in parenting that they trace directly back to the residential school. Four generations of people in that community went to residential school, were forced to go there. There

school. Four generations of people in that community went to residential school, were forced to go there. There allegations and proven evidence of abuse of all kinds. And that's what they say the root cause is.

PC: And so Ron Lepage talks about this too, this lack of know-how of parenting and passed on from generation to generation. So this is Ron talking about that issue.

SOUNDCLIP

It took away the parenting from Aboriginal people. It took away what they knew how to do. They knew how to take care of their children. They knew how to be parents, but they were told by someone else that they didn't know how to do it.

PC: And so there it is—the repercussions of not knowing how to parent. Do they talk about their personal responsibility? I know that sounds a bit uncouth but that's where a lot of people land on this. Like well, you need to change things.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Yes, they do talk about that and I want to be fair. I don't want to say that this is the portrait that we are talking about here today, is all of Cross Lake. I mean Cross Lake is a fabulous community in many ways and there's some people who really do have their lives together. But there's a great many people who don't for reasons that they would tell you and I think that many people would agree with are not their fault. Nevertheless, yes, they are now in a crisis again and they don't know what to do. They need some help. These people who are broken, these people who don't know how to parent, these people who don't have the infrastructure, the finances to do all the kinds of things that they would normally expect and want to do for the children, need help. And more importantly, the children need help.

PC: And I think you as a parent, me as a parent, I mean if your kid says they want to commit suicide or has attempted to commit suicide, I mean what to do? Get them help. That's what we all try. And you spoke to Vince's dad, right? Vince Gill's dad, Vince Sr. And he talked about not wanting his son to repeat the poor decisions that he made.

SOUNDCLIP

VINCE SENIOR: The hardest thing I did when I quit drinking. I changed my ways a full 360. That was so hard, I'll tell you that. But the only reason why I did it was for my kids and for myself, first and foremost. If I hadn't changed my ways, I would have been six feet under the ground. That's why I don't want Vince to follow our footsteps in that part. That's why I want to put that part away.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: So you don't want Vince to have your life.

VINCE SENIOR: No, I don't want Vince to have my life. [Crying] I told my son to be strong.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: And that's Vince Sr. and to his very great credit, you know he is an example of someone that really did turn his life around and has been living for his children. You'll have to watch the documentary to see what happens with Vince Jr. because his life over the course of the months that we got to know him took a pretty big curve.

PC: I want to ask you about Maxine, 15 years old. We heard earlier talking about how she still struggles with thoughts of wanting to take her own life. How is she managing her own thoughts of self-harm? She's also a parent.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well and this is one of the things that I think surprised us the most because normally you'd go into a community like that and there's a lot of very young parents, a lot of single parents. And you'd think wow, this is a problem or this is indicative of a problem and in many ways it is. It's true. But in each of those cases, those babies become the reason that these young women in particular get their lives together. And Maxine is an amazing example of that. She has an 18-month-old boy and this is the girl who says quite candidly I get up some mornings and I simply want to die. But the reason she doesn't do anything, the reason that she keeps going is because she now has this baby.

SOUNDCLIP

I can't leave him. I can't leave him here to think like, why did my mom do that? She probably didn't want me. She probably didn't love me. I don't want my kid to grow up like that, wondering why I'm gone. He'd probably think like I didn't want him. But he's the one that's still keeping me together to this day. I'm going to try to finish school and get a better life for me and my son.

PC: And Gillian, so Christian's 17, Vince is 18, Maxine's 15. Are they going to school?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Maxine is back in school. She's in grade 10. She's had a rough year. It's been up and down but she's still in school as we speak today. Christian in January actually passed grade nine after his fifth time. He's now in grade 10 and he's hoping to accelerate and all things being equal, he hopes to graduate from high school next year. Vince actually will graduate. He's scheduled to graduate in June. And as I say, his life has taken a turn and you'll have to watch the documentary to see. But he's in good shape.

PC: The other you know 140-some kids who are on this suicide—and not just all kids, right, there are teens and some adults—who are on the suicide watch list. Are they now getting any more resources? What are they getting to help them?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Well, as I said earlier they're not getting enough. They're not getting everything that was promised to them. And the concern they have and they know this, is that it's now been a year since they declared their state of emergency. It's been many months since anybody's written about Cross Lake and this issue. That just means the frustration level rises but it also means that some very good people in that community resolve to double down and do what they can. And when you leave Cross Lake, that's the lasting impression is the local people who are doing what they can.

PC: You know very well Gillian, the power of the gaze of the camera, and especially when you turn it on yourself which is what these teens did. So how do you think giving them cameras and giving them a voice—I think that many of them say even if we have a voice, it hasn't been listened to—how do you think that's affected them?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: It's been interesting to watch them over the course of the nine months that we are there because initially I think they were skeptical. They thought well, hey, if you're going to give me a camera, great.

PC: Yeah. Some team of people from the *CBC* flying up north and coming into their community.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: I don't think they expected that we would keep coming back and I think because we did, we did develop a relationship with them and a certain level of trust and we could see that in each case—and they're all different—but we could see in each case, I hope, this increasing sense of self-worth. You know I must be important because they've come in and they said they want me to tell my story and they're going to take time and they're going to keep coming back and they're going to be Facebooking me and they're going to be in the meantime. And we've seen transformation in all of them actually. But there's a last clip and it's the last clip with the documentary—and I know you've got it cued up here—that I think really encapsulated how Christian himself, you know the boy who had such a terrible upbringing and has so many challenges ahead of him, he's still optimistic.

SOUNDCLIP

I want to get this out because what if somebody is going through the same thing out in the world? There's always a better way to settle things instead of suicide. There are things that are going to come your way and knock you down. But it's your choice whether to get back up or not. No matter how dark your path is, there is always a little light shining at the end of it.

PC: Focus on the little light, huh?

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Focus on the little light.

PC: I look forward to seeing your documentary. Thanks, Gillian.

PC: I look forward to seeing your documentary. Thanks, Gillian.

GILLIAN FINDLAY: Thanks, Piya.

PC: Gillian Findlay is co-host of the CBC's **The Fifth Estate**. **Cross Lake: This is Where I Live** airs on *CBC TV* tomorrow. That is Friday, April 7th at 9 p.m., 9:30 in Newfoundland and parts of Labrador. It is a special one-hour commercial-free presentation. It will also be live streamed on Facebook. Now here are some more voices of young people in Cross Lake. This is a song called "Pitch Black".

[Music: "Pitch Black"]

PC: That's a song called "Pitch Black" by a group of youth from Cross Lake, Manitoba. You can check out their music video by going to our website, www.cbc.ca/thecurrent. I'm Piya Chattopadhyay sitting in for Anna Maria Tremonti. **The Current**'s back in mere moments.

[Music: "Pitch Black"]

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Experiencing 'eco-anxiety'? Report suggests link between climate change and mental health

Guests: Ashley Cunsolo, Kim Keenan

PC: Hello. I'm Piya Chattopadhyay sitting in for Anna Maria Tremonti and you're listening to **The Current**.

SOUNDCLIP

I'm anxious all the time. I don't have a way to stop being anxious. I feel really embarrassed about being anxious. Nobody around me seems to be so anxious about this problem. So it's really, really, really an unpleasant feeling and anybody who's ever had an anxiety attack or just lived in a state of really heightened anxiety can know how painful it is to feel this anxious all the time.

PC: The problem making Liz Galst so anxious is climate change. A few years ago, the New York City editorial consultant found herself struggling with what some are now calling eco-anxiety. And Liz remembers what it was like to live with it.

SOUNDCLIP

There's a lot of shaking, tossing and turning at night. Obsessive thoughts about how I can fix this, what I can do to make it better. There's shying away from news reports and studies I come across my computer. There's a sort of embarrassment about feeling this way and a sense that I'm alone in this feeling. Meanwhile, I'm taking the stairs instead of taking the elevator to save every last bit of electricity that I can because I know that most of it is produced in fossil fuel burning power plants. I can't read the newspaper without it being redacted by my partner. I can't listen to the radio news because I'm never sure if there's going to be some news item that's going to set off sort of an anxiety attack and I can't think about the future without thinking about what's going to happen with the climate? Is my New York City apartment going to be underwater? Is the agricultural cycle going to be entirely disrupted? What's the future going to hold for my kids? I started handing out these little cards that tell motorists who are idling in their cars all the benefits of turning their engines off. And I start taking the stairs instead of the elevator. I send out e-mails to my friends to ask them to switch to a renewable energy supplier. But none of it seems to really tamp down my anxiety at all. In fact, you know with each new news report, my anxiety kind of grows. I keep telling myself to try and calm down. And at the same time, I keep telling myself: there must be something more that I can do. There must be some small thing that I can contribute to put a stop to this. For my son, I'm concerned that his future will be entirely disrupted. That civilization won't function as it has. That there won't be the safety and protection that he will need and deserve to function as a member of a working society. It's really not

fun.

PC: That was New York City editorial consultant Liz Galst. She has since sought professional help and says her anxiety levels have come down significantly. It turns out Liz Galst is not alone in feeling the mental stresses of climate change. So-called “eco-anxiety” has become a shorthand description for symptoms that psychologists are starting to see from Nunavut to Australia and beyond. That feeling of distress is detailed in a new report by the American Psychological Association. It found that worrying about climate change is having a serious impact on our mental health and it is something it says we need to pay a lot more attention to. Ashley Cunsolo contributed to that report. She is the director of the Labrador Institute at *Memorial University* and she joins us from our studio in Happy Valley-Goose Bay in Newfoundland and Labrador. Ashley, hello.

ASHLEY CUNSOLO: Good morning, Piya.

PC: So the introduction of this report says that the tolls of climate change on mental health are far reaching. What does that mean? What are the effects of climate change on mental health?

ASHLEY CUNSOLO: Well, I think you heard some of them that Liz so clearly articulated in the opening segments. I mean everything from a strong emotional reactions where people are feeling alone and isolated and scared and afraid, to more chronic issues around depression and issues with anxiety, potential increases in substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, dealing with the trauma and shock of either acute weather events or longer-term changes in the environment. So what this report is looking at is all the pathways in which a changing environment impacts the many different things that lead to someone's overall mental illness.

PC: So the obvious question is how do you know—those are a lot of things that you mentioned there— how do you know that it is climate change causing these conditions and not other things?

ASHLEY CUNSOLO: Well, that's a great question. I mean it's certainly very complex when you're looking at mental health issues in general because there are many, many different things that impact our mental wellness and lead to you know mental resilience or coping strategies. The information from this report though is really drawing on several different sources. And so the first is what we know already from what's called disaster mental health, so